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Reagan opens campaign for aid to Contras

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President Reagan launched an all-out effort yesterday to wrest \$100 million in military and humanitarian aid from Congress for Nicaragua's anti-Sandinista rebels.

"You can't fight attack helicopters piloted by Cubans with Band-Aids and mosquito nets," Mr. Reagan told GOP congressional leaders at an hour-long White House meeting.

Resistance leaders and Western military observers have said in recent months that among the rebel's top military needs are weapons to shoot down Soviet Mi-24 helicopter gunships used by the Sandinista army. The gunships, known as "flying tanks," decimated the resistance fighters in several key battles last year.

The president did not rule out the possibility of a negotiated settlement between the Marxist Sandinista regime and the rebels. But, he said, "there are many ways in which a democratic outcome can be achieved in Nicaragua."

"It could happen at the negotiating table or by the success of the ground resistance," he said.

After lengthy haggling with the White House last year, Congress granted only \$27 million in humanitarian assistance to the anti-Sandinista rebels, also called "Contras." That aid package will expire at the end of March.

Sen. Richard Lugar, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, and House Minority Leader Robert Michel declined yesterday to make a firm prediction on the fate on Capitol Hill of the new Nicaraguan aid package — \$30 million in humanitarian aid and \$70 million in covert, unrestricted assistance for the rebel forces.

But both said that congressional sentiment for the anti-Sandinista rebels appears to be building.

Mr. Reagan is expected to inaugurate a high-visibility campaign for Nicaraguan aid tomorrow, when he travels to the Caribbean nation of Grenada.

But administration officials admit there is little public understanding of the issue. Mr. Reagan, they say, will have to make his case in simple, forthright terms.

The president is expected to argue that Nicaragua's Sandinista government is indisputably linked to Cuba and the Soviet Union, posing a major threat to Central America and, ultimately, the United States.

One source said Mr. Reagan essentially must tell the public that "a communist government has hijacked a country down there the same way they've hijacked airplanes."

The argument that U.S. aid is needed to pressure the Sandinistas to fulfill the democratic promises they made in 1979 "lacks clarity," one source said.

Mr. Reagan said yesterday, "The resistance has continued to grow and is operating deep inside Nicaragua," but more aid is needed.

After meeting with the president and hearing situation reports from Secretary of State George P. Shultz, Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, CIA Director William Casey and Treasury Secretary James Baker, Mr. Michel said the \$70 million in proposed aid would be spent at the president's discretion and could be used for "almost anything."

No official would say which government department would administer the military assistance package, but, as covert aid, it would normally be handled by the CIA.

"But the bottom line here is you cannot counter helicopter gunships with peace-shooters," said Mr. Michel, Illinois Republican. He indicated the bulk of the aid would be spent on military needs.

Mr. Lugar, Indiana Republican, said the Soviets appear to be putting "substantially more" military equipment into Nicaragua, and two ports and three airfields are being built.

"In short, we have to make the decision whether we're going to have a Soviet base on this continent or not," Mr. Lugar said. "Essentially, we're going to have one if the Contras are not successful in reordering the government of Nicaragua."

Mr. Lugar said the package is crucial for the establishment of a democratic government in Nicaragua.

"Clearly, without the support of this new legislation, the Contras would have trouble bringing the Sandinistas to the negotiating table," Mr. Lugar said. "And that's the point of all this, to get negotiations and a new government."

White House spokesman Larry Speakes said there was a massive influx into Nicaragua of Soviet and Cuban weaponry and personnel in December and January. That, plus the lack of funding for the resistance forces, "has tied our hands," he said.

When asked if the United States was out to overthrow the Sandinista regime, Mr. Speakes said: "Yes, to be absolutely frank. Our objective is to stop the communist foothold in the Western Hemisphere. We have the potential here for a new Cuba. It doesn't have to be an overthrow, but we want the Sandinistas to

hear the voice of the democratic opposition."

Mr. Reagan has indicated repeatedly that he does not plan to let a communist stronghold develop in Central America while he is president.

Mr. Michel said the president would have to build public understanding to win congressional support for the aid package. He predicted that the Sandinistas would launch a "great disinformation campaign" as soon as the administration made public its new aid program.

Mr. Speakes said the United States is aware of a "very sophisticated, carefully drawn plan by the Sandinista government to influence Congress against providing additional aid to the resistance."

"It calls for use of the media and a campaign of disinformation of the success or failure of the Contra force," Mr. Speakes said. But he declined to say how the administration knows about the disinformation plan to influence American opinion.

The anti-Sandinista rebels are seeking the \$70 million in proposed military aid for all types of equipment, particularly small arms, government sources said yesterday.

The amount roughly correlates to the amount the rebels said they needed last August, one congressional source said. Topping the list of needed equipment were small arms, ammunition, trucks, field radios, training and other items all the way down to shoes, sources said.

Some of the trucks and radio equipment have been supplied already in recent months under covert aid provided under the Intelligence Authorization Act of 1986, which was approved late last year. The legislation extended the types of aid that could be supplied to the rebels.

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The \$27 million approved last summer for humanitarian aid did not include such items as trucks and radio equipment. The Intelligence Authorization Act permitted trucks, radio equipment and communications training to be provided.

If approved by Congress, the \$70 million in military aid would supply the rebels with weapons for the first time in two years. One source said as many as three-quarters of the estimated 17,000 to 23,000 rebels might be bound to their camps because of the lack of arms and equipment.

In a related development yesterday, a human rights agency estimated that Nicaragua is holding 6,500 men and women as political prisoners out of an overall prison population of 9,000.

"If the figures are reasonably correct, and I think they are, then this country has the most political prisoners in Latin America," said Lino Hernandez Trigueros, executive secretary of the Permanent Human Rights Commission of Nicaragua.

Staff writer Walter Andrews contributed to this report.